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ABSTRACT

A rationale for the study of second languages focuses on problems encountered in communication which impede the development of interpersonal and international understanding. Difficulties caused by faulty translation, word order, stress, juncture, and intonation are illustrated. As a means of maintaining interest in second language learning, the author proposes the varied use of: (1) real life dialogues, (2) dialogue adaptations, (3) choral responses, (4) individual responses, (5) patterns drills, (6) patterned interrogation, (7) dramatizations, (8) songs, (9) films, (10) role-playing, (11) games, (12) dictation, and (13) written exercises. (RL)

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LANGUAGE: Key to International Understanding

Speech given at annual meeting in Boston
on Friday, November 6, 1971.
by Gerhard M. Wilke

The Chinese have five points of the compass: N. S. E. and W. and where you are. It is important to know where you are, especially if you want to find out where you are going. Not only must you know where you are, but you must also know why you are there.

I have often been asked, "Why learn a foreign language in school anyway?"

In my classes I ask this same question of my students to try to get them to realize why they are there, i.e. in the classroom. In other words, I try to encourage and guide the students to formulate some ideas as to why they are studying the language. In response I get many reasons, such as language is needed for college, for transfer, for foreign travel, business, to read foreign literature, until I encourage someone to state the ultimate purpose of language study; viz., international understanding and world peace. A high ideal, you say, but how can we hope to deal with the peoples of the world today without understanding how they think; and what better way is there to learn how they think than by means of language study? In other words, language is not just a tool; it is a living and organic thing and should be dealt with accordingly. The language of a nation is the most important key to understanding its people, its way of life, and its thinking. Through language a nation retains its individuality and expresses its culture. Students today comprehend this need

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for understanding and world peace because their world has seen no peace.

Now that we have established why we are there studying language, the next question is, how do we go about teaching the language in order to reach this goal?

Language must be taught as communication. In order to teach language as communication which ultimately should lead to international understanding and world peace, we must enable the student to communicate effectively in that language. We must help the student acquire a deepening knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of that language and culture. We must develop in the student an awareness of the relation between his own language and civilization and those of the country whose language he is studying, and as a consequence, develop in the student a better perspective on American culture and a more enlightened attitude as an American citizen.

We must make the students aware that language contains great messages, but we must see these messages through their eyes (the foreigner's eyes), i.e. understand their language as a means to achieve lasting peace in the world.

In order to maintain the interest level of the student in the classroom, we must use a variety of procedures and techniques. For example, we can employ real life dialogues, dialogue adaptations, choral responses, individual responses, pattern drills, patterned interrogation, dramatization, songs, films, role-playing, games, and dictation as well as written exercises. Notice I have omitted "translation," something no doubt you were brought up with, or still use. This is a definite skill which some students acquire easily and some never. In my classes, it is considered "a dirty word" because other techniques can accomplish the same end; and

besides, "translation" leads to word for word equivalents which do not always exist, and it keeps my students from thinking in the foreign language. An example of what literal translation can lead to: "We are gay as we have good marks."

An excerpt from a letter that I received from Germany written in English will also illustrate my point.

> On this occasion we want to hand over to you our prospect with some informations about Wolfram's art. His repetoire is including 400 of the most beautiful German songs of all transmitted periods. Their words full of meaning and history, as well as the instruments Wolfram is using for his accompaniment, all are asking for an interpretation which shortly is given in the beginning of each performance.

That's a real example of word for word dictionary translation. Since the dictionary can't talk, we run into all sorts of difficulties.

From here in, I will use illustrations that present difficulties to foreigners studying English; of course, similar difficulties are experienced by students of other languages. Students in my classes and, for that matter, all language classes experience difficulties with prepositions. I always sympathize at first, but immediately give them examples in their own language to illustrate similar difficulties foreigners have in studying English.

For example, "The oil that will keep the upkeep down," or "If something turns up, call me up and I'll drop down," or "Let's put on a take-off." "Inflation has become so bad that it has hit the price of feathers. Even down is up." "He will be put out, if we put it in."

Since we stress the oral language, especially when we teach it as communication, we encounter difficulties with words run together which

consequently sound like other words as in the following: my daughter asked me, "What is a country full of pink cars? A pink carnation."

Or in this story: Two lions were sitting at a bar and in walks a beautiful blonde bombshell. One lion says, "She looks good enough to eat," and he does just that. Later on he goes home and gets a stomachache. He takes a sedative, but to no avail. He then calls up his lion friend and explains what he has done and asks him why he thinks he has a stomachache. "Well," says his friend, "it's probably from that barbituate."

Synonyms are also a source of trouble. For instance, you can call your wife a vision, but for heaven's sake, don't call her a sight. Or as the disenchanted husband said: "I met my wife at a travel bureau. She was looking for a vacation and I was the last resort." Or as I saw in the morning paper: "T.V. is a medium where anything well done is rare."

Pronunciation shakes up many a student. By the way, what's a bar stool? That's what Davy Crockett stepped in. Or a honeymoon is the thrill of a wife time.

Word order is sometimes inclined to be tricky as in an awful pretty hat as opposed to a pretty awful hat; or chair arm, arm chair; station bus, bus station; leather shoe, shoe leather; race horse, horse race.

Sometimes only the degree of stress, i.e. loudness makes considerable difference in meaning, as in: the lighthouse keeper's daughter or the light housekeeper's daughter.

International understanding cannot be achieved without understanding the differences in culture. It is therefore highly desirable that all language students spend some time abroad and be at home abroad, viz. live

in with a family as the only English speaker in that family. In five or six weeks time, he will not only be fluent, but have an understanding of their way of life and living. This type of program should be included in every successful language program. Please note I said five or six weeks. The one and two week programs are almost meaningless and for the most part are just "conspicuous consumption" to use Thorstein Veblen's phrase.

If this is too expensive (but five or six weeks can be managed for less than $800), try the reverse, bring abroad home (what every man wants). Seriously, by way of movies, recreation of the foreign scene and immersion in the foreign tongue, we can bring reality to the classroom. Both programs are in the best interest of international understanding.

We are all aware of the fears that a child has moving from one town to another or going from one school to another in the same town. What happens to these fears when the child crosses cultures? As part of this culturation process, let me tell you this story. In Puerto Rico, Mrs. Rodriguez, after dinner, takes the plates, one by one, and empties the scraps out the window where the pigs, the chickens and the sun take over. When Mrs. Rodriguez and the family move to New York, to a sixth floor walk-up, even though she has changed habitat, she still hasn't changed habits; and after dinner she proceeds as in Puerto Rico. As soon as she notices, Mrs. Blau runs upstairs to Mrs. Rodriguez and says, "You can't do that here," and then explains, "here in New York you scrape the plates into the newspaper and then throw it out the window."

Then consider how ridiculous, ill-mannered and shocking a Japanese

visitor would look if he were to strip to his underwear during a cross country train trip, or if he were to wander in the halls of his hotel clad only in undershorts, or if he were to relieve himself on a public street, or if he were to lower his trousers to get at his money belt when paying his hotel bill. Yet, that is exactly what he would do at home.

Another incident I remember was reading to German children from an elementary reader, "The rooster says 'cock a doodle-doo,' and I saw only blank stares and wondered why. Upon inquiring, I learned that no self-respecting German rooster ever says, 'cock a doodle-doo'; he says, 'Ki Ki-Ri-Ki.'"

I was brought up in Holyoke with my many Irish friends and, of course, became involved in the Clash of Cultures as illustrated in "God made the Irish, the Devil made the Dutch, Whoever made the British, didn't make much." By the way, I understand that the police in Holyoke are cracking down on bookies. Does this mean they are guilty of race prejudice?

In Holyoke, in the NABS-JOBS Program, I discovered last spring that they have Spanish speaking natives who have a good command of English teaching English to other Spanish speaking people. I believe this should prove very successful because the teaching personnel understand the culture and socio-economic background as well as the difficulties of the people whom they are teaching; and as a consequence, their teaching is more meaningful.

The ultimate goal of language learning is to understand and appreciate the culture of other nations so that the peoples of the world can live together harmoniously, that is, without destroying each other. In other words, international understanding.

The goal is reached by progressively developing the specific goals of understanding, speaking, reading and writing the language you are studying. In order to attain this goal, language study must be sufficient to communicate ideas, or its reason for existence is lost.

In Europe, languages are studied for seven to nine years. Dr. James B. Conant, former president of Harvard, in his report advocated long sequences of language study. Where do we find these long sequences in this country? In few communities--Why? They are expensive, and the taxpayers object; but that's another story.

Language should be taught as communication because, you will bear with me, language is a complex, structured system of arbitrary vocal symbols learned for intercommunication within a cultural community.

Words are certainly our most important instruments of expression, our most characteristic, universal and enviable tools in the conduct of life. Speech is the mark of humanity. It is the normal terminus of thought. We are witnessing in our time the greatest changes in the history of language learning. Formerly known by a few as a mark of education, languages are now studied by people from all walks of life. More languages are studied than ever before, and methods of learning them are changing radically. What a wonderful way to foster international understanding!

Let me conclude with an excerpt from an editorial in the New York Times, dated September 12, 1970, entitled "History Repeats ?"

> The reported decline of foreign language studies in the nation's high schools raises the specter of a dismal chapter in American education history repeating itself. In the late 1920's, many educators dismissed foreign languages, along with mathematics and science, as irrelevant frills. The illusory politics of isolationism made it easy to deride the skills needed to communicate with foreign people and cultures.
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> The trend was not reversed until the American people, alarmed by Soviet progress in space,

reconsidered the schools' mission and Congress provided funds to upgrade science and foreign language studies. It was then also that Dr. James B. Conant persuaded schools across the country that a minimum of four years of foreign language study ought to be part of the curriculum for every talented student.

Unfortunately, educational leaders failed to match the upsurge of interest in foreign languages with a much-needed updating of teaching methods and content. Despite the availability of electronic language laboratories, instruction too often continued to vacillate between dull tourist phrase books and readings closer to the hearts of graduate researchers than of adolescents.

Politically, the signs now point to a relapse into cultural isolationism, even though such a posture is an absurd anachronism in the jet age. The educational leadership cannot be held solely responsible for misguided intellectual priorities. But neither can it be absolved of the charge that it bends too readily to the winds of popular and political change, without upholding what may be less comfortable, but more productive. To call irrelevant what is merely difficult is the road to intellectual as well as national decay.

Let's promote language study to foster international understanding. If both the teacher and the student know why they are in the classroom, the learning (situation) atmosphere is increased tremendously.